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SUBJECT: BULGARIA: PM DEFENDS EC COMMISSIONER NOMINEE

Classified By: CDA Susan Sutton for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Prime Minister Borissov came to the defense of Rumiana Jeleva, Bulgaria's Commissioner-designate for the International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response portfolio, a day after Jeleva's underwhelming performance in her January 12 European Parliamentary hearing. Borissov accused political rivals in the Bulgarian Socialist Party and former-king's party NMS of conspiring to bring Jeleva down to embarrass Borissov's GERB government. While his foreign policy advisers are urging him to drop Jeleva's candidacy to spare the country any further embarrassment, Borissov is unlikely to cut the loyal Jeleva loose unless specifically asked to do so by European Commission President Barroso or the European People's Party head. This is a no win situation for Borissov. If he replaces Jeleva, his political rivals will secure a victory and he'll be forced to dig into his already-shallow bench to find someone else to send to Brussels. If Jeleva -- who came across as rattled and overwhelmed in her hearing -- becomes Commissioner, Bulgaria will once again live up to its reputation as the European Union's weakest member. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Borissov's defense of Jeleva breathed new life into her candidacy. The day after Jeleva's January 12 hearing, the Prime Minister's advisers were urging him to withdraw her nomination to spare the country any further embarrassment. They agreed that Jeleva's hearing was unfair -- that political rivals in the Bulgarian Socialist and NMS Parties sabotaged the hearing by spreading rumors about the ties of Jeleva's husband to Bulgaria's underworld. Jeleva was reportedly prepared to answer such questions, but became completely unglued when the hearing focused on conflict of interest accusations surrounding a small consulting company she once owned (and later sold for less than USD 4000 in 2009, her advisers tell us). Jeleva's supporters and detractors alike say the hearing lacked order and they are embarrassed by the spectacle of Bulgarians bashing compatriots on the international stage. But outside Jeleva's inner circle, the most common reaction to the hearing was embarrassment. Jeleva came across as unprepared and easily rattled. Her performance showed lack of preparation and substance. Her wounds, they say, are self-inflicted.

¶3. (C) Borissov is known to value loyalty over competence, but he is also a shrewd political actor. For now it seems he has decided to support Jeleva rather than let his domestic political rivals chalk a victory. Our contacts say he'll abandon Jeleva only on the personal appeal of Barroso or EPP head Daul. Daul re-affirmed his support for Jeleva January 13, but there was wide speculation in Sofia January 14 that a Barroso call to Borissov was imminent. If Borissov must sacrifice Jeleva, he'll have to dig into his already-weak bench to find an adequate candidate to replace her. The leading candidate is current Defense Minister Nikolay Mladenov, whose departure would be a heavy blow to continued reform efforts in the defense sector. Other possible GERB-connected nominees include current MEP Andrey Kovatchev and EU Funds Manager Juliana Nikolova, but neither seem to

have the needed stature or cache. He'd be loath to do it, but Borissov might be forced to look outside his young GERB party for a nominee. Possibilities include MEP and former Foreign Minister Nadezhda Mihailova (from the Union of Democratic Forces) and former Commissioner Meglena Kuneva (NMS), although Kuneva's suspected role in the smear campaign against Jeleva appears to have dimmed her prospects.

14. (C) Comment: Whether Jeleva stays or goes, Borissov loses. If Jeleva's nomination collapses, Borissov's rivals will score their first victory against the new GERB government. Just as devastating, Borissov may be forced to tap one of his top performers to send to Brussels, leaving his government weaker in the process. If Jeleva is ultimately confirmed, she'll enter the Commission with the burden of having to prove she deserves to be there. This episode burnishes Bulgaria's reputation as the member state least prepared for membership -- a reputation Borissov promised to improve upon taking office.

SUTTON